MIRROR

When Mari and I first met, I loved the way we talked with our bodies as if they were our common language. I only knew a few simple Spanish phrases from grade school and she said English was far away from her that night. So with terrible faces and sounds she acted out her job for the past several months, stamping out metal toys in a Queens factory. I accompanied her with grunts and grins, then I mimed my own occupations—word processing and playing music. After that we laughed and drank a lot of wine.

Then at our next meeting, the night we sat in front of the fire, I asked her to stay with me for a while. How was I to know what I was asking?

Three times she entered my life as boldly as a mountain confronts the sky. The leaves were always changing color when she came. Three times she left, irrevocably like setting suns—once to Europe, once home to see her family, and now to her homeland, Argentina, perhaps forever. My very bones are marked.

Much of our time together was spent here in my small studio on lower Fifth Avenue. I was stationary like a stage set; she was mobile in her entrances and exits. She loved to sit where I'm sitting now, here in my favorite chair, a white wicker with blue velvet cushions. It held us both many times. I remember all the fires we watched, the sparks that skipped towards us across the 'rainbow hearth.' She called it that because all the tiles are different colors.

There, in the darkest corner of the room, the solid old piano she fingered timidly stands as permanently as an oak tree or a monument in a New England village. No one understands how it could have been carried up five flights of rickety wooden steps. Behind me is the couch, our couch, which opened up so luxuriously for us with a flirtatious sound all those nights. And in that corner stands the desk we shared. She propped up the narrow mirror on it so that we could see ourselves writing. I can see my face looking back from it now; my expression is intent, puzzled. That mirror will no longer hold her comic faces bent on keeping me enthralled with her. Those were her first faces in that mirror; later they were replaced by more somber ones.

Above me hang two huge masks I made years ago for the street theater. One is the face of the sun, the other the moon's face. Mari said we didn't need any lamps in this room. The masks lit us up as we plucked and beat and strummed on all the instruments I've collected. When we got tired of playing we fell into our blue chair and shared favorite passages from the books we were reading.

I watch a flyer for a women's concert slip from the wall and slide along the floor near me. I'm sure that Mari can hear my thoughts. Even in absence, she is strangely present.

My eyes find the brightest corner of the room. Some sun miraculously finds its way in here through the small skylight window. This is the kitchen area, where she hung comfrey up to dry. I'll make myself a cup of tea later. I will sit at the desk or at the table where we must have shared more than three hundred meals. I could easily map out a route of our love by tracing the nicks and scratches we made in the soft wood.

Mari wanted me to take down the satin curtain and put up a real door for the bathroom. Didn't she know how often I watched her silhouette dance on the curtain, as she luxuriated in that hot belly of a bathtub with its great lion's paws?

J.P. Morgan's servants once lived in this room on the top floor of this converted townhouse. They had names. I wonder how many people were cramped and for how many years in this fifteen-by-twenty-foot room? I found a set of rusted skeleton

keys that had been wedged behind the ancient radiator. How many decades were they there? They fell by my feet, like a plea from the past, one frozen day last winter as I tinkered with the valves to keep the radiator from sputtering. I hung them over the fireplace for good luck. Sometimes I sense presences hovering over me while I'm lying in my bed at night. There is something haunting about those ancient keys. But it is the key to my unsettled memories of Mari that I'm searching for.

Though we worked out some kind of peace between us when she left this last time, the fact that I don't expect to see her again has suddenly struck me harshly. I am both senseless and opened like a terrible wound. All the tumultuous yearnings she exposed in me have erupted once more. Now I feel that perhaps the words *lovers* and *friends* weren't made for us—our essential languages were too different. Rather, the primal utterances that fell between these words, controlled us, spoke us.

* * *

In a dream I watch her fall from the sixth floor and land flat on her back, face up and still breathing but badly hurt. I implore firemen, police, friends, and neighbors to help me care for her. But no one stops to listen, and only through a great expenditure of effort am I able to approach her. She has landed barely alive, on grass but inches away from concrete and the lethal spikes of a metal fence. As I kneel by her, not knowing whether to touch her or let her be, I wake up in a sweat to the sound of a phone.

"Did you hear yet from Mari?" Sarah Schoen, one of Mari's fans, is speaking. "There was an earthquake in Mexico City yesterday. Eight point nine on the scale. Isn't that where she is now?"

* * *

I remember all the articles I read in the *Times* when she left me the second time, the time she returned to her family, her country, to continue her work as a political and visionary poet. I was afraid for her then. Literary magazines shut down. Whole groups of activists murdered or vanished. People seized off the streets on their way to work or home, never to be seen again.

These stories kept her constantly in my mind. I'm still not sure whether she was among those hiding in the basement of a modest home in the suburbs while the military, crouching behind carefully pruned bushes, picked them off like so many wooden ducks. Was she there in the tenth floor apartment in downtown Buenos Aires when a death squad kidnapped the friends and relatives of the editor who advocated human rights? And where was she the night several guerrillas in their thirties—her age—jumped to their deaths from an abandoned warehouse rather than be murdered by a spray of bullets? Was she really safe on a tiny island miles from the city, with her five dogs and a compañera, surrounded by poor families who imagined exotic, peaceful planets?

* * *

Mari rushes up eighty-eight worn, wooden steps coming to see me. I watch her from the flaked railing outside my studio on the top floor. She embraces a guitar and a bouquet of colorful birds; no, they are flowers fluttering into my arms. Petals of tulips, narcissi, irises, daffodils caress our noses and lips. Her gift warms me. There is no heat in the building, this first time she has come to my place, October 27, 1974.

"How happy makes me to be here," she says. "I come when you need me, don't I?" There is nothing to say; she has spoken the truth.

I find the perfect container, the cut crystal vase on the window ledge. As I fill it with water and the flowers, tiny rainbows dance in the vase, in the flowers, on the walls of my small studio. What a fine feeling! These flowers, these delicate shapes woven in air, are so unlike the expected offerings from eager young men. These wild shapes seem to be metamorphoses from her lively imagination, solidified briefly for our pleasure.

Would she like a fire?

"Yes," she says, "I will watch the flames dance to my music." Soon I am swaying with the lush sounds of Torcaza, her guitar.

"You would like my peoples, my land, Judith," she assures me over and over. "My green ocean, my Pampa, is the beautiful.

The white horses, they play leap over with the clouds. And the butterfleas take long rides on the backs of tortugas."

The way she speaks English is so dear.

"What you say, tourtles? And my river, the Parana, she moves slow like a great dragon. She remind my peoples of our power to get reed of the norteamericano business mens. Wowse!"

I watch her face being sculpted by lights and shadows, appearing more animal than woman, familiar yet extraordinary. Her bold, open look excites me. She is not afraid to receive others. I feel I could adore her.

Someone might say her chin is too small. Another would laugh at her wide cheeks. She says her nose is too short, like her mother's; her legs are too long, like her father's. I think she is beautiful.

I am awed by her large breasts settling into her chest. I think of sand dunes settling into the sea. I put my hand on her shoulder, but she does not respond. She has eased into a quiet, deep place.

Suddenly sparks fly wildly about us in all directions. One just misses her bare foot. I crush the small ember with my thumb, hoping to impress her.

"It is the quasars which make to me, how do you says it, fascinacion?" Her eyes are focused on the ceiling.

"That's it!" I respond enthusiastically as if she has supplied the missing piece to a puzzle. "We use the same word, fascination. Maybe I can learn Spanish from you, Mari. But what are quasars?"

"The quasars are the black woholes in the sky which are the center of the universe." She smiles knowingly. "There, all that is goes to meet all that isn't."

"I love the way you make holes into woholes, but your quasars are a bit abstract."

"Look them up in your dictionary," she challenges.

I do.

"Here it is, Mari." My voice trembles as I read. "It says, *Quasar—astronomy, a quasi-stellar object, a black hole, an accumu-*

lation of matter so dense that gravity prevents the escape of light and would squeeze the infalling material sufficiently to release vast amounts of energy." Is she flirting with me through her mysterious, distant objects—super luminous objects that move faster than light—lying near the fringes of the observable universe, with vast energy productions almost impossible to explain?

"These are energy sources of great magnitude," she continues. "They are wildly spinning accumulations of the matter; they make chain reactions."

No doubt about it; the way to Mari is strewn with quasars not flowers. I wonder if she relates to something as mundane as a back rub.

"Entire stars fall into these black woholes." She beams. I reach across a galaxy and begin to rub her shoulders, her backbone.

"A billion times more massive than our sun...." There is a great indentation in her spine above her buttocks. I move into it gingerly.

"You have found it," she shouts. "My quasar!"

"Mari, you must do exercises to straighten your back."

"No, no. I like my black wohole. I will keep her," she says.

* * *

Perhaps I can salvage parts of her from the many photographs and letters I have. Many of her thoughts are shut up in the cardboard box underneath my desk. Did I really sleep next to her only a week ago?

Her letters often came weeks after they were written. We never worked out a system for knowing which ones did not make it through the tight grip of the censors. Twice we were able to smuggle tapes across the distance that divided us, a distance that has seemed as unknowable as that bridging life and death. Yet it was always a hit-and-miss process. No plans. No anniversaries. No repetitions. No security. Words we spoke or wrote down one day were lost in the wind the next. So, when we were actually together, we tried as best we could to stay in the present. Looking backwards or forwards was perilous.

Argentina — at the house of my Mama and Papa

Querida Judith,

Judith, did you receive my letters? I don't know nothing of you yet but I listen you always when the day will come.

Judith, going through time. I don't know where I am. If in the childhood or in the teens or here in the edge of the struggle or there now kissing you in some beautiful oldness with you inside me forever.

I'm spreading joy among this landscape of flesh and memory.

Judith, to tell you about my family, about the alamo tree, about the spiritual aura of my father and about the strength of my mother and the beginning of our hard friendship. About the fresh eyes and the torments of my sister. About my old cat and the small birds and the wind of the Pampas shattering the giant grass and all the terror and all the love you will feel only if you could come to my land.

People come to see me all the time and we drink mate from morning to night. They come to see the strange star, the wonderful foreign woman. And they go back happy because they found me like them, talking or silent or smiling or eating empanadas, with the mate most of the time in my hand.

I feel to grow inside me infinite poems and stories. I stay looking a lot the oldest people of my town, the oldest corners and the doves we call torcazas sadly singing under the pines.

How are the robins and the owl over the maple tree? Tell me about you. Tell me about your family. Tell me about your people and your land that is also mine more and more while I fall into love by this people and this place.

And now I'm a voice that conceals, and now I'm a voice that speak about all you.

I will stay here until September 11. After I go back to Buenos Aires because I have a place for me now. I'm moving to a small and light room one hour away of the downtown, a quiet sector. I payed a month and I will see how I will pay the next. I'm doing some little job here and there.

A magazine bought me yesterday two chronicles, one about Chicago and one about the factory in Queens.

It's so hard to find job and house here, but nevertheless I believe that would be important and visionaire for you to know this land, to spend some time here. But be careful. You probably can't to get job here.

I am looking for women to talk to within a feminist awareness in the class struggle context.

I dreamed wit you last night again. I was crying so long inside the dream because inside the dream I was losing you. I love you so much and so hard.

Mari

I am looking again at letters and photographs Mari gave me. No one would guess that I stored them away in the Gilbey's Gin carton. I filed the photos in chronological order so I could study how she changed and grew, even before I knew her. Maybe I knew that someday I would use them to make sense of her, of us. Some of the pictures she mailed to me, so I could see how she looked in strange, new places. Others, she just left behind with the rest of the paraphernalia she couldn't afford to take along. I'll sort them out on the table again. This time I'll arrange them in a circle. I'll light a candle too, and watch Mari quiver with life.

Here is definite proof that she was real, human; she was not an alien. But even when I show these pictures to my friends, I don't tell them how much she means to me. Maybe because I don't yet know myself. I won't know until I've worked her out in my mind with words. In a way, these shiny images are more real to me than the person who has come and gone so many times. They are what I can touch, hold, look upon. They are Mari.

Mari, in this one it looks like the devil has been scrubbed out of you. Your skin is so glossy, like wax. A spot of light splashes on your face and on the wall behind you. You're posed for a portrait. I don't feel you here. Your head looks like a ripe fruit that you're holding gingerly in your hands. Isn't there a monkey-on-a-stick or a bright balloon to make you smile? The photographer could have told you to say *Chica* or *Ché*. Where is your Papa, mi

pájarita? He could make you giggle.

I imagine Mari is mad at her mother. She wanted to wear the old leather vest that used to be Uncle Alberto's. But her mother buttoned her into this white silk blouse, enhanced by a delicate chain and gold cross. A white satin ribbon pulls her hair back tightly. Too tightly! Mari is held prisoner of her mother's desires and ardent faith.

Mari told me her mother would slap her and shout, "*Diablesa!*" whenever she did not want to help with the chores. "*Diablesa!*" when she left her little sister alone and sister fell off a chair or into the mud. Mama had no patience with the eldest daughter who preferred chasing *las tortugas* and singing rambling songs to baking bread and mending *las blusas.*

During her girlhood, Mari absorbed her mother's frustrations and self-hatred in a climate ruled by the fathers. Not until years later, when she left her parents' house, did she begin to stretch into her true shape. Then for the first time she enjoyed glancing at her image in a mirror. She told me about a ceremony she did in her twenties to bury the sad child I see in this photograph, dressed in the crisp silk *blusa.*

But Mari, when did the *consejo de ensenañza* pressure your parents into placing you in the mental hospital? Why did they want to tranquilize you and force you to be other than what you were? Surely not at puberty, not when your menstrual blood had just begun to flow? You told me, but I've forgotten. I guess I could not take knowing that an open and sensual child was confined and mutilated with deadening drugs. I remember you told me how threatening your visions were to others. Only a fierce sense of self-preservation helped you escape from this incarceration so that you could live by your imagination.

I hold now the photo of Mari taken at the age of twenty-one, the year she walks bravely away from the small stone house of her parents, turns her back on the village of her childhood. She will not return for many years. What gave her the courage when so many of us are kept prisoners of our families?

How tall she looks, planted firmly against a white sky. She stands on those hard, stone steps constructing a blueprint which

will lead her through fifteen countries in the next several years. This curious woman-boy wears boots made from the skin of an animal she had once cared for. Indian myths tell her that they now possess magical powers.

Her small slender hands thrust defiantly into the pockets of jeans. Mama will no longer tell her what to wear. She feels for the tiny picture of an Amazon princess she had hidden there. She finds it and I hear an impassioned cry. "I want to be what I can be! I want to be me!" Once again, an old fantasy I keep trying to hide in a corner of my heart slips away with these words. Mari doesn't exist to serve my needs either. She is sipping maté far away someplace in a land I do not know.

I need my drum, the one by the piano, the one I made a year ago. I wish she were here to play it with me. I used a small barrel I found on 22nd Street when I was out gathering scraps of wood for my fireplace. For the skins I used the thin skins of the Indian drum, the caja chayera that Mari had sent me after she returned home.

When I pick up this fragile instrument I remember how the original one collapsed. I placed it too near the fire one night hoping to tighten the skin. The broken instrument haunted me for weeks until I realized I could make another using the same parts.

I inserted small wooden pegs behind the secured straps that fit against the barrel, pegs that could be pulled downward to tighten the skin.

I love this drum. Holding it fills me with peace. It sounds as good to me now as it did when I first played it two and a half years ago. My fingers are so eager to beat. I want to find the rhythm used by the Indian women to accompany their *bagualas*, wailing chants mourning the loss of their land.

I can't bear the photos on the table any longer. But pictures of Mari are cascading in my mind. I close my eyes. Follow her. Stalk her into the past. See her wander through the places she has shown me on the map. Cordoba, Santiago, San Miuel, San Salvador, Mendoza are small cities she explored in Argentina. Peasants in Santa Cruz, Cochabamba, Oruro, La Paz in Bolivia see her small, solid woman's body edge along the rough roads.

Young Chilean revolutionaries in Valparaiso, La Serena, Antofagasta, Arica hear her lush-voiced poems, her primal weapons. I watch her move northward again through the Indian villages where she learns the ancient rites of Peru. I imagine her as protagonist in an ecstatic ritual.

The names of other cities Mari knew come to mind. Arequipa, Pisco, Lima, Huanuco, Iquitos, Trujillo, Chiclayo, Piera. I'll say the names again. I love their sounds. See how whole towns fall off the tip of my tongue with ease? Towns I once did not know existed?

In Quayaquil and Quito of Ecuador and on the Island of Isabella, she dreams repeatedly that Michaelangelo's David walks ahead of her with a grenade in his hand. The dream both terrifies and excites her. With sores on her feet she trods into Colombia, scanning the hungry faces in Pasto, Cali, Bogota. Along the coast near Barranquilla and the Island of San Andres, she plays in the reedy grasses and sings with birds I've only seen in National Geographic. By way of Honduras and Guatemala she enters Mexico.

When I see her in this picture, resting on the bed of a sleazy hotel room, my skin prickles. But she looks content just to have a roof over her head. The strained atmosphere of childhood is giving way to more natural moods. She is finding a home in her body, settling in with her own possibilities.

Friends encouraged Mari to seek publication and soon small publishing houses issued her delicate books in modest editions. Yesterday, when I picked one up, I imagined I heard tiny explosions. Were they seeds bursting with life? Or grenades destroying it?

When this work was done she moved on to caress the worn stones of Aztec temples, to gamble at Acapulco, to flirt with drugs at Veracruz. She shared beds and adventures with other wanderers. All manner of people were attracted to her and she liked them too, for they were helping her to like herself.

Mari, take your hands out of your pockets. Officials are waiting to examine your *pasaporte*, the same *pasaporte* I now hold in

my hand. You are about to first enter my country at Houston, Texas.

Mari is distracted, distraught. But the officials are satisfied. They push her on with sharp, impatient words. "Okay, next," snaps her into the moment and she hitches her possessions to her back, the worn orange backpack and the woven shoulder bag with writings, books, and the last letters from Margarita. She moves on but her limbs are sluggish, unfeeling.

News of Margarita's death reached her only that morning, though it had happened months before. She had killed herself and was found clutching a small cloth animal Mari had given her as symbol of their undying friendship. Their connection as lovers had been brief. Margarita's books stood as bold examples in a land where the voices of other women were being smothered. They had inspired and guided Mari's movements from one landscape to another. Now she would have to enter my country feeling a primal loss, like the loss of a limb. Breathe deeply, Sweetheart. You will love again.

She makes her way to the Chicanas in Texas, in California, in New Mexico. She picks fruit and exchanges stories in a lively mixture of tongues. Phrases leap passionately from other lips to hers and slowly she makes them her own.

Oh, Love, la fortuna did not forecast the ecstasy I would find along the electric back of America. La bruja did not tell me that this planet is a beast stretching under its fur of leaves. Wake up, Me! It is the end of childhood, the beginning of road. Mari wrote that.

The candle wick sputters. I am alone in my room. I am not with Mari. I don't know where Mari is.

* * *

My mirror is oval, framed in soft silver. The handle is wood and was made to be held. It invites use. Others' mirrors might be set in carved ivory or bone with handles of gold leaf or mosaic, passionate gifts of new lovers. I can imagine many breathtaking rituals of auto-seduction, but I can only describe my own accurately.

I need darkness to feel safe. I need a small source of light so I can focus my attention. I need warmth so I can relax before my small mirror, my window into myself. I need a comfortable bed, an elegant cloth, so that when I am filled with the sight of me, I can lie back and wrap myself in pleasure.

Look at my vagina! No one has inner lips like mine. No one else carries such a butterfly between her thighs. I laugh with shyness, with joy. The tips of my fingers trace their scalloped edges. The velveteen softness always surprises me. Their responsiveness to my touch still amazes me. Arousal stimulates a fantasy.

I am handing out brightly colored speculums to passersby on the steps of the New York Public Library. A crowd quickly surrounds me. Both stone lions turn to me and nod, encouraging me to speak.

"My friends, do you realize that at this very moment thousands of women are gazing into their own vaginas for the very first time?"

Questioning faces are fixed upon me. I must go on.

"The vagina, extraordinary organ of sensuality and perceptiveness, is the earth's household from which all life emanates. This organ must be honored and obeyed."

A young girl, her punk hair rising proudly from a hardened face, pushes towards me. A bent, elderly woman beams her eyes upwards into mine. Hispanic women directly to my left unfold a giant, purple flag. Sewn in large silk letters of brilliant colors are the words, "Vagina Omniba, E Pluriba Una." I wave at them knowingly and they wave back.

"The key to our spiritual powers is our own sexual organ," I say to the crowd, now pulsing with excitement. "Your womanhood will be made holy, yes wholly manifest. Heed the source of your woman power." The word, vagina, *is on everyone's lips.*

Now music accompanies my daring delivery. Harps join the flutes. Bells and melodious trumpets follow. The two lions leap from their podiums and frolic with the crowd.

Many women are holding up varied sizes and shapes of drums for me to see. They need my approval. Soon an organic

beat blends with the rich sounds of the other instruments. "Vagina Omniba," becomes a penetrating chant. I am floating on the vibrant energy now released. The lions and the chant fade into the weight of my hand on my sex.

My left hand inches towards my opening. My right hand still grasps my small mirror. My clitoris has slipped behind the sheath, like a reluctant lover. I pursue, teasing the skin back until it appears proudly, yet vulnerable, budlike. I feel both relaxed and poised.

The territory I want to cover is vast, geographical. Crests, valleys, plains, rivers present themselves to my hands. I am overwhelmed by sensation. Still, I resist orgasm and explore yet another spot wanting my caress. Hot waves pulse from my center, I can no longer hold back. I succumb into orgasm and then another and yet another.

Why do I need a lover when I can give myself pleasure, I wonder? Primal sounds and the soft cloth hold me. Then the feel of Mari's tongue pressing on my clitoris overtakes all other sensation. And I begin to ache for her terribly. The gnawing awareness of her absence has been lessened only momentarily.

* * *

"And when one is alone, can one simply love oneself? I try to do that, you see. When you're alone, Mari, do you ever make love to yourself? Do you masturbate? Do you give yourself sexual pleasure?"

I feel her body tighten beneath me.

"I cannot to give myself pleasure, Judith. For me the sexual love is the wonderment expression between two people."

"Have you ever tried it?"

"I can reach down there and touch the vagina. That's not hard. I know where she is. I know so well the little flash button which in the passionate embrace seems like the totality of the sensual feeling."

"I'm talking about really being your own lover sometimes. I think it cuts down on this longing we all get into for the one and only. Loving the feel of your own hands, exploring every part and texture of one's own sexuality. And letting your mind move

with whatever fantasy you need to get the juices going. It can be quite a gas."

She sits up so she can look at me straight on. "I think there is something like repugnance for me in the sexual onanism. It is like a blasphemy against the act of coupling in the sexual-spiritual embrace of different, attracting persons from which for me all love is born."

"Mari, you know, that sounds very much like a heterosexual notion—where each person owes their wholeness to the fact of the other, instead of to the fact of themself. I know what you mean about the power of two people being attracted to each other and expressing that attraction through sexual love. But to think that's the only way to be sexual can be destructive to us. After all, we don't always have somebody else to make love with. But we always do have our bodies which need to be touched and need release. And then when we do have somebody to make love with, we're always expecting the other person to act in a way that complements our need of them. Why not be whole unto ourselves? Then everything else is a piece of cake. But give ourselves what we need first."

"I know a lot of women here think like that, Judith. But for me it doesn't work. I can't to arouse myself in that way. For me the beauty of the life is the mysterious interaction that occurs between the two people and I don't want anything to take that from me."

"I don't think the one pleasure has to take from the mystery of coupling—of joining, as you call it. But I think self-love and being able to give oneself pleasure can be compatible with loving, touching someone else. Don't you think so, Mari?" That was when Mari began to weep.

* * *

Here, this photo is the one I cherish most. We are sitting together on the roof above this studio—the roof where Mari once threatened to leap away from me forever because I had taken another lover.

I always held her especially close when someone took our picture, as if I could ward off destiny. I see how she holds me

close too, protectively. She's keeping menacing presences away.

I feel her eyes on me now, burning into my mind like two candle flames. They are accusing me: "You can't pave a smooth road for me even now, Judith," they seem to say. "Stop trying to explain me. You give me qualities that are your own."

* * *

Oh Mari, love, I admit there will be holes in this story, not like the intense woholes of your imagination, but like the tender punctures in your ear lobes. Do you remember how I cleaned and put tiny crystals in them? These jeweled spaces will be for you.

Can I take this rush of you? Static images have become a movie:

There she is lying on that cheap pad. Greasy fingerprints and wilting wallpaper surround her. How can she bear it? Some benevolent spirit must protect her. Can I watch her fucking a Viet Nam vet missing a leg?

Now she's listening to that too-friendly college professor espousing on the genius of Borges. He should be listening to her. Her sensuality is exploding.

Look! Off she gallops across a great desert, sagebrush catching in her capa. This time a camel-smoking cowboy pursues her. The bees are after her flower.

I will photograph her on carpets of alfalfa, wheat. I want to see her in a cornfield. The ripened tassels are exactly the color of her hair. She will look good hugging trees, a maple, an oak, a birch. She loved the smell of pine.

Each new name, new texture, new shape thrilled her. She was always a child, learning. But the circles of red paint stroked on the elm trees made her cry. She knew a terrible blight moved across the terrain ahead of her. She had a sixth sense for danger.

I never took her picture when she danced. She was like gravity, pulling everyone's eyes towards her. She loved *Muddy Waters* and *Jefferson Airplane*. She knew more about the sixties

groups than I did. The *Grateful Dead* found their way into her dorm when she was in college. She loved our country music too.

Where is the shot I took of her with Torcaza, her guitar? Did she take that with her?

This is the last picture, Mari with a puertorricueña child in the subway. Everyone wanted to take her picture. Come Mari, through the fume-filled tunnels, the searing screeches. Come to me.

Soon I'll hear her climbing the stairs; she'll be with me again in no time. I'll blow out the candle and we can rest together in the darkness. I'll try to tell her a funny story, though I'm not very good at it. "Do you know, mi hermana, how the *Rock Way Rollers* from Scotland came to be named after a small town in Ohio, my home state?" She always loved stories about home towns. "It all began when the boys in the rock band put a map of the world on the wall. They blindfolded the one who played the sax, turned him around and around and told him to stick the pin anywhere in the map. The place pierced by that pin would name their group. And do you know, Mari, the pin went straight into Rock Way, Ohio, 30 miles from my house in Centerville."

I would want to tell her more about my town. How the Main Street was abandoned for the shopping centers. How there are no trees now to shade you from the sun when you shop. But she'd be sound asleep. My stories always put her to sleep.

* * *

Buenos Aires, Diciembre

Pirujita, te quiero. I draw my love for you all over the air of the pampas. Your eyes, and the shape of your head still on my breast make me feel strong and tender and alive. Together we blossom.

Let us to grow the rainbow, the wind among the trees, the bread, the wine, the song, the poems, the little noices of our bodies hugging each other under the sun of midnight.

Let us to be two to be infinite beings but also to be just one deep ONE until the end of the times.

I'm trying to control myself a lot, emotionally because I want the madness faraway of me. Judith, many things are enough okay. Don't be worry for me. I will work and will organize a little my life next months. I will come to be with me.

I sent you my caja chayera, the Indian drum from the north of my country. It was playing for me and for another people with so deep feeling. Women play the caja during the carnaval specially, singing strange songs named bagualas with high voices, full of sadness, full of nostalgia because they lost their land and their culture. They play stand up, holding with a hand the strap of leather and drumming with the stick with the other hand. We give this kind of objet only to a person we know will use it, will sing it with the true spirit. I know you will find our soul inside this drum.

A dove from the Pampas gave me her feather for you, for to fly into your body is the beauty of these days, my distant one. I think you during our summer with the icicles on your nose.

I'm doing a series of articles about the Rolling Stones. I remember the long nights with you listening them. Their terrible and so energetic music.

Why this? Why all this perfect natural harmony and between that you and me separate? And when we were together we were also separate for the swords as well as the tendernesses. And why if we chose each other between millions, if my eyes were looking you from the fern's age, why to be as far apart as one star from anither?

It's a terrible violence with me and with the Universe. I embrace you strong against my breasts.

Mari

* * *

Mari, did I ever tell you what it was like for me as a child, one of twins? Did I tell you that when I looked in the mirror over the bureau, the face I saw smiling back at me often was not mine; the frowning face in my childhood snapshots, the face that could have been mine, was not mine? Did I tell you that when I breathed at night my breaths were initiated, layered or echoed

by another's? Did I tell you that the first time I knew I was me and not her, not both of us, was when I fell and felt the sharp pain in my knee; I was the one crying, she was the one watching me cry.

I see a child, myself, huddled in a small bed, separated by a chasm of several feet from my twin sister. She is curled into herself in an identical small bed. Her steady breathing tells me she is sleeping soundly. She protects her thin body from the monsters who eat up twins. If they decide to tear one of us away from our mother, which one will it be? Which one is the real daughter? Which one the mirage? Which one wipes dust off the mirror? Which one is in the mirror being dusted? Every night I juggle these questions. Maybe we are monsters.

Mother never intimated that we were freaks. She never explained why Rusty Thompson, who babbled incoherently with fingers sticking in his ears, followed us to school each morning, crying, "Look, two! Two just alike. They must have been made by the same company." She saw him laugh and pee on our good shoes. She saw nice kids throw stones at us along with sharp, nasty words. She saw but kept silent.

She said, "Everyone knows me now as the mother of the twins."

She could have put us in the circus. We could have become skilled at rainmaking, at appearing and disappearing from all sides of the room at once. She could have strapped us together forever as grotesques and sold us for a tidy sum. But she was content to dress us alike until we were eighteen, then send us to different colleges where we gasped our first breath alone, sucking in our separateness for the first time.

My sister knew how to ward off the ghosts who hid in our twin bureau. She didn't give them the time of day. She knew how to yap at the macabre shadows drifting under our twin beds, then go to sleep. But I stayed awake to confront lurking presences. I stared at the patterns of lights and shadows washed across the ceiling by passing cars. Shapes and textures became frightening figures and words.

I would be brave and try to face my fears alone, without her. I

would make a prayer that would be heard beyond the light blue ceiling of our room. Praying, like feeling pain and later joy, could give me a freeing sense of my own selfness.

I would ask God how to help my parents get along better.

Should I say that mother yelled at father to take the garbage out? That he cussed her back? That they didn't kiss or hug each other? That he never bought her beautiful presents like Mr. McKinney bought for Mrs. McKinney? That I wasn't sure if they really liked each other?

Oh my sister, my sister-self, what turbulent worlds did you hide or silently try to remake as you clung to yourself beside me? As I took on our parents problems did you find your own ways to escape? I saw our twinship gradually being torn asunder by this lack of visible tender love between our parents. I was becoming our mother's mate and Meredith, my sister, our father's.

Because I was younger, though only by ten minutes, my mother saw me as 'the baby.' She reached through me back to herself— Constance, youngest of eleven. She coddled me, groping to love her own infant shadow-self.

My mother, little Constance, was an easy target for teasing. She ate up the strawberries she was supposed to bring home for supper. She preferred her fingers to silverware; there were always spots on her clothes. When she was sent to the garden to pick tomatoes and lettuce, she came home with pine cones and wild flowers. Yet, she lapped after her brothers and sisters all day, enduring their scoldings like a faithful puppy. Years later I could see how my aunts and uncles must have looked down on my mother with that mixture of fondness and disdain as they told me stories about their baby sister.

But Constance would surprise them all. She was eyeing the top of the family totem; she would climb her way out of her humble position.

She exchanged passivity for ambition. She would not marry laborers as her sisters had done. She would not be poor. She would marry a white collar and tie man—a lawyer, a doctor, a chemist. She would have a large house and three children that she could send to the best colleges. She would be the perfect

hostess for a successful husband. They would belong to exclusive clubs and attend the Episcopal church. She would be chairman of women's groups and he would play golf. Together, they would be pillars in their community.

Not all of her dreams came true. But being a strong-willed woman, she found a way to live with uncomfortable realities. She simply rearranged them in her mind as easily as she moved an arm chair from one end of the living room to the other to make a more acceptable, a more pleasing arrangement, one that others would like.

My early days were spent under my mother's hypnotic power. I was her puppet, lover, slave, chaperone, bodyguard, accomplice and avenger. My sister expressed bitterness about this passionate union she witnessed but did not experience. To pacify her, I stopped competing with her and stepped meekly into the shadows where I could see but not be seen. When we both ended up as finalists in the town's skating tournament, I wanted my sister to win. So she did. When we both competed for a scholarship to an acting camp, she came away with top honors. Then I convinced myself and others that I tried as hard as I could. Now I can say I had greater needs to contend with than winning. My grave, self-appointed caretaker position offset my own ego.

My darling sister did not take her betrayal by the other two women in the family lying down. She transformed our father into her shield and in the name of rules he would uphold, she knifed me deeply three times when my life choices were intolerable to her. She severed our connection each time, quickly and without remorse. I forgave her for those rejections, still believing that the kind of intense connection I shared with my mother must have felt like a terrible rejection to her. But now I wonder: Were the frowns I have seen in our childhood photos simply stating: "Why are you here too? I would like to be the only daughter!" Will we ever find a way to mend that terrible cleaving I feel but do not understand? Am I my sister's keeper?

When the monsters grew too large for me to handle and I stumbled in my appeals to God, I slipped out of my bed and

scurried to the bed of my mother. She took me in warmly. She needed me as I suffered with her well. I would try to tell her what was troubling me. For she was also my confessor.

How good it was to hold onto a real parent and snuggle my face into real flesh. Doubts about the effectiveness of prayers to the heavenly Father were ripening. His abstract image lifted like a foggy nightmare as I tried to time my own breathing with her longer and deeper breaths. "Mother, I'm very worried about something. I...I...I'm afraid to tell you."

"What is it, Judith? Tell me, little shadow baby."

"Doesn't father like to take the garbage out?"

"Your father works very hard. He's a good father to you kids."

"He never smiles at you."

"He doesn't drink. He doesn't gamble. He brings home his paycheck every week."

"You never smile at him. You never touch each other."

"You don't understand, Sweetheart."

"Why aren't you and father glad to be with each other? Why can't you be like other married people?" My voice, though less formal than it had been with God, sounded strange. It didn't sound like it belonged to me yet.

Mother remained silent so long I thought she must have fallen asleep.

"Ma? Ma?" I whined. "Did you hear me? Why can't you and father be more like married people? I mean, why do you have to have separate bedrooms?"

Finally she spoke. "Judith, there are many things you don't understand. My hands are tied. We have three children to provide for and your father is a good father. We work very hard for you kids. Believe you me. Now go to sleep. And it is not your concern." She turned on her side away from me.

Maybe the lack of a romantic glow in their relationship didn't bother her as much as it bothered me. Maybe I didn't have to protect her all of the time. And she was right. I didn't see how hard father worked at his job. I didn't appreciate then that he didn't drink or gamble. I didn't see how special he was in his own way. I didn't understand that his predilection for being

ornery was a habitual self-defense mechanism because he lacked the ability to assert his needs in a convivial manner. And I didn't know when I was young that he used a little room in the basement of his office building to putter in sometimes after work hours to invent clever little gadgets. I remember a little clock that every hour would jump up and down like a Jack-in-the-Box. Maybe he was making them for us, for his children. I don't know because mother made him throw them away in her periodic scourgings of disorder and dirt in the house. He never talked about it. I didn't see that I carry my father in me just as I carry my mother. I couldn't see him because he didn't seem to want to be there in the house with us. And he never held me or was tender. He was the ghost who hid under my bed. He was the father who didn't respond to my prayers.

It would take years of my own difficult experiences with love to learn to respect my parents in their tenacity and ability to accomplish a task they had set for themselves. It would take years for me to understand that this ability to stick to a certain goal, though it seemed constrictive and limited to me, was in fact one element of love that could inspire and serve me throughout my life and work. I could learn from some of their techniques though content and vision would differ.

The nights I slept with mother did not relieve me of my troubling concerns. She didn't say that though it was hard work to raise children, she and father loved each other very much. And her need to protect her choices—security, a home, three children—without demanding that magical ingredient, passionate and tender love, became the closet I had to escape from. I needed to feel that parents stayed together because they wanted to—not only for the sake of the children. I didn't know then that I would have to help create alternative environments where people not unlike my mother and father would have more choices. But I did know then that I hated the sinister expression, "My hands are tied," and the puzzling statement, "I've made my bed so now I'll sleep in it," uttered periodically by my mother.

That night I whispered goodnight to my mother again and again until at last I fell asleep. My small arms gripped her in

preparation for a possible encounter with a recurring dream: She wraps me in a stiff cloth, places me in a small crib as I sob uncontrollably. She lights a small fire near me, walks away and leaves me wailing all alone.

* * *

"In Zorra's sleep the galaxies were born." Mari's voice, muffled by the silvery, silk curtain separating bathroom from kitchen, enters me. She is reading from her work-in-progress.

"She imagines the millions of tiny hairs on all the pubescent pelvises on earth. She listens to the way the world moves. Motionless, she listens...." I feel my shoulders relaxing.

"Judith, come here and see the filamentas on my estomach," she interrupts herself. Though I don't know Spanish, I have no trouble understanding *filamentas* and *estomach*. I am instantly aware of a flush on my face, different from the heat I have been feeling from the crackling fire. I go to her.

She stands naked before the mirror, smiling and combing her hair. I move behind her and place my hands on her hips. I look at her face in the mirror. She feels what I feel. It does not take long for me to undress. Now we are both naked.

She lays the comb down on the sink, turns to me and takes both my hands. We sense the awesomeness of the moment. No words can describe the feeling well. I lead her through the silk curtain to the kitchen table. Shyness overcomes me and I drop her hands and turn away.

I should prepare the vegetables I have placed on the table for supper. But as she lowers herself to her hands and knees, the vegetables blur in front of me. Fire dances in the entire room.

Strong hands caress my thighs. A warm, wet organ, her tongue, moves insistently between my buttocks toward my throbbing clitoris. We are needy animals. Her head twists upwards and I spread my legs, my lips, for her convenience. I put my fingers into her mouth, touching the tongue which caresses my vagina. I slip to the floor and pull her to me. Her mouth is on mine. Her two eyes blur into one eye, the third eye in the middle of her forehead. Our passions match perfectly.

I remember that we didn't wash our hands before supper. We joke together and say the vegetables would be seasoned with our own scents. I think we eat in silence, each lost in her own wonderment at our passionate embrace, each questioning where this passion could lead us.

Buenos Aires en Julio
Querida Judith,

How is running your summer, Judith? How many fireflies and smiles? How many clouds making a shadow over your head?

What can I sing you? About people and about me or about the meteors falling each night inside my pupils with the sound of you? What? Because I adore you, I have not words for you. I have the misterious silence that is the music of love.

I have few friends here. The people with who I share this apartement, particularly a woman with who I have a tender friendship. And Fernando. I see him sometime and occasionaly other peoples. A little female cat came here one night, and she stayed here and was named Flora. It was cold and she cry and cry.

I have also some little green plants and a magnificent sun came up to shine our life three days ago. I was sick and kept miself in bed for several days. In the beginning of that Fernando gave me your last letter as beautiful as full of life towards me.

I pretend to forget **Zorra's Book** *now. Maybe if I can forget I will remember her and my book will become light and articulate. I'm reading and spending a lot of time with do nithing.*

Birds are singing from the eucalyptus trees, my beloved giants. And Argentina, painful mother is beginning give birth to herself again. Searching the road people is moving, slowly moving together.

Oh Judith. I also don't want to lose you, my love. I'm here and close to you mi companerita.

Mari